

USING REFLECTIVE JOURNALS IN ESL PRESERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The concept of reflective teaching has been an accepted approach in teacher education training for quite some time (Richards & Ho, 1998). Advocates of reflective teaching have reported that this approach has been effective in helping trainees become better teachers (Cruickshank et.al.1981, Zeichner, 1987; Schon, 1987). One way to implement this approach into a teacher training programme is through journal writing or reflective journals.

This paper will describe a study which attempted to investigate the role of journals in shaping the reflective process of pre service teachers in Malaysia. The main research questions were: 1) to what extent were reflective journals an effective tool of growth in enhancing pre service teachers to become more reflective. 2) to what extent did reflective journals provide insights into understanding complex concepts such as teachers' beliefs and attitudes of teaching English in the Malaysian context.

This paper will report the findings of this study. Instances from the journal entries will be analysed and discussed. The primary source of data was from journal entries as well as observations and an interview. The participants involved were final year Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students in a Simulated Teaching (PBET3103) course at the Education Faculty, University of Malaya.

INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the role of journals in shaping the reflective process of preservice teachers. This included to what extent journals were an effective tool of growth in enhancing preservice teachers to become more reflective. It was expected that through the process of writing a journal these teachers (participants of the study) would be able to self-analyse, critically reflect and assess their own teaching in the micro-teaching classes that were conducted. Besides this, the journal entries would also provide tangible evidence into how preservice teachers think, plan, and implement their lessons in class. More importantly though, it was hoped that the journal entries would provide invaluable insights into understanding more complex issues of how teachers perceived their own beliefs, notions and attitudes of teaching English as inexperienced teachers.

The main research questions:

1. To what extent did reflective journals help shape the reflective process in preservice teachers?
2. To what extent did reflective journals provide insights into understanding complex issues such as teachers' beliefs, notions and attitudes of teaching English?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of reflective teaching has been an accepted approach in teacher education training for quite some time (Richards & Ho, 1998). Advocates of reflective teaching have reported that this method has been effective in helping pre service teachers become better teachers (Cruickshank et al. 1981; Zeichner, 1987; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1981; Schon, 1987).

According to Apple (1975) as cited in Bartlett (1990), reflective teaching is:

...a painful process of radically examining current positions and asking pointed questions about the relationship that exists between these positions and the social structure from which they arise. (p 205)

Thus, reflective teaching is critically analyzing and continuously looking back or ahead at the actions that teachers have taken or will be taking in the classroom as well the implications triggered because of these actions towards the learning environment.

A variety of approaches have been used in implementing a reflective approach in teaching. These include action research, case studies, ethnography and journal writing (Richards & Ho, 1998).

One way to use reflective teaching into a teacher training programme is through journal writing or reflective journals. The benefits of journal writing have long been recognized in many studies as an effective tool to shape the reflective process in preservice teachers as well as recording their thinking process.

The use of journals have been studied extensively and advocated by many researchers such as Schon (1987), Zeichner (1987), Bailey (1990), Jarvis (1992), and Barkhuizen (1995).

According to McGill and Beaty (1992):

Among the many benefits of journal keeping , the aspects that consistently emerges as a special strength in its value in enabling students to make connections , such as connections facilitate the assimilation and development of concepts and assist students to discover personal meanings in their learning experiences.

According to Brock, Yu and Wong (1992:295) in Richards & Ho (1998) the benefits of journal writing include:

- Enhancing awareness about the way a teacher teaches and a student learns
- Providing firsthand accounts of teaching and learning experiences
- Providing ongoing record of classroom events
- Enabling teachers/researchers to examine trends emerging from diaries (in Richards & Ho, 1998).

However, limitations of journal writing have also been found. Journal writing is time consuming, artificial for those who are not regularly journal writers and ultimately a tedious activity. Furthermore, because of the informal nature and subjectivity of journal writing, journals are sometimes difficult to analyse and interpret (Richards & Ho, 1998).

With these factors in mind, this study investigated the role reflective journals played in shaping the reflective process of preservice teacher s from a more Malaysian perspective. In addition, for the researcher, the use of journals was also a more informal way of getting feedback, insights and evidence of the reflective process in preservice teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The main data source was from the journal entries of the participants. Out of the initial 20 participants involved in the study only 9 handed in entries. These journal entries were then read and reread many times to find emerging and recurrent themes.

The participants were final year Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students who were in my Simulated Teaching class (PBET 3103). At the end of this three year programme, they will graduate with a Bachelor of Education degree in TESL; and will be teaching students at secondary school. A few have had some experience teaching in primary schools while the majority of the participants have never taught before.

The participants signed consent forms agreeing to participate but they had the freedom to withdraw at any point of the study. Participants were also given notes and articles about writing journals and the reflective teaching approach. These references were given as a guide to the participants to help them write better reflective journals.

FINDINGS

Out of the 9 journals that were analysed, 4 could be said to show more reflection than the others. These four participants (P1, P2, P3, P4) wrote more about their beliefs or notions of being a teacher, for example:

For me, a good teacher should only possess two important qualities that are to be well prepared and to know your job well. You see if the teacher possesses these two qualities, then the other qualities will automatically come together.

I remember getting really frustrated with teachers who do not seem to know he/she is teaching... When I teach next time, I would make sure that I take these two qualities seriously. I don't want my students to go through what I went through last time! (P1)

They also wrote about the fears and insecurities on being a teacher,

What I fear mostly when I go for teaching prac is that I won't be able to control the classroom.

I'm nervous speaking in front of many people... I don't think I have the charisma that a teacher should have. That is why I don't want to be a teacher, so it is better for me not to be... to be frankly, after almost three years being here, I am still not reach the 'quality' that an undergraduate student should have right now. After all these years, I am still not capable speaking confidently even in front of my own friends and not to mention these silly mistakes that a TESL student like me should never do. So, tell me how can I teach students at school when myself is not good enough? (P3)

They also showed a greater sense of self awareness and reflections in their writings.

Today I learnt that my greatest adversary is self-doubt. I learnt more than just teaching. I learnt to believe in myself and confront my fears. Thankfully, with much preparation, I manage to emerge victorious (well, almost... there was that grammatical mistake...) And now for the individual presentation. (P4)

The other 5 participants (P5, P6, P7, P8, P9), on the whole, merely described what happened or regurgitated what was taught in class with minimal comments or reflection. They were unable to go beyond this level to a more self-analysing, critical and evaluative mode.

Communication with students is very important to teachers. There are two types of communications, which consist of verbal and non verbal. Verbal is using of the voice while non verbal are gesture, facial expression, eye contact and physical movement. Other than verbal, non-verbal are also important when teaching. Eye contact is also important to get the student's attention. A teacher must not stare at the same spot or at the wall while teaching. He or she must gaze around the room at every student to check and get their attention. Facial expression is another important factor for non-verbal communication... (P6).

It was also found that there was no clear indication that journal writing enhanced the process of reflection in the participants of this study. The four participants that showed more reflectivity in their journal entries did so even from the beginning. For example, P4 noted as early as in her second entry:

As I am coming to the end of this entry, I came to a realization. An 'A-Ha' moment as Oprah would call it. This little lady (her teacher Madam Hilda) had made such a great big impact in my life that some choices I made in life were greatly influenced by her. She was indeed a great teacher as she has a deep passion for her profession. Evidently, she loved being a teacher (P4).

For the other 5 participants, the journal writing experience did not seem to become an effective tool of growth to reflect on their teaching beliefs or practices and very minimal instances of reflectivity and critical evaluation were shown in their writings. In fact, most of them talked about things that were often unrelated to teaching such as personal happenings. For example:

Today's lesson was held in the morning at Bilik Ehsan. I usually dislike morning classes, not just because it is early and you have to rush up since the moment you get up, but also the problem of avoiding not to be yawning in class. But the worst of all is catching the cold. I am very sensitive, especially my nose. Usually, I'll be sneezing as soon as I come out from the shower. It will drag on during my journey to class, in class itself (where the air-con is always on) and right till afternoon. (P9)

In general, they did not seem to be able to look at the situation or problem given in class and analyse this very specific situation in depth and value.

For today's class, it was not that bad as there were notes taken down, activities with the class and discussion among group members. Basically our lesson is about techniques that we can use to teach our students in the classroom. We learnt about the skills of giving instructions such as examples of clear and bad instructions. We also learnt that there are many ways in giving instructions or even when explaining something. Especially when the students have trouble understanding the teacher.

Thus, most of their writings were general or superficial comments made without reflecting on more deeper and subtle issues.

DISCUSSION

From this study, it was found that writing in journals was quite a challenging task for most of the participants. Some were not really comfortable with the journal mode of writing which was thought to be very personal form of expression yet was read by their lecturer (researcher).

This is my first writing to you and I am still trying to find my own journal writing 'tempo'. Bear with me for several more faulty entrees and by then I have become accustomed of writing and confiding to you and grew more comfortable with you.

The majority also had problems writing reflectively. The researcher found that participants were unable to go beyond the level of recounting or informing. As Bartlett (1990) affirms:

Reflective teaching, like most teacher-based forms of self inquiry, is not an easy process. It involves a major shift in emphasis in our thinking and acting. Becoming reflective focuses us to adopt a critical attitude to our selves as individual second language teachers – to challenge our espoused personal beliefs about teaching. (Bartlett, p.213)

The findings of this study are similar to Jarvis (1992) who found that participants were unable to go beyond the description to a more reflective mode of writing and teaching. As Richards and Ho (1998) reiterates:

The mere fact of writing about teaching does not necessarily involve critical reflection, since teachers can write largely at procedural level (p.162).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although 4 participants did show some reflectivity, it can be said that for most of the time all 9 participants were unable to go beyond the narrative and descriptive level to analysis and evaluation. They seldom could relate the examples given in class to what they would do or they could improve, adapt or take a step beyond the given example in class.

In addition, as pointed out by Barkhuizen (1995) not only teachers enjoy journal writing and as noted by Bailey (1990):

Several diarists have mentioned that it is probably not a good idea to force anyone to keep a journal. Some people are simply not comfortable with self-examination and introspection and the issues that emerge can be painfully revealing. For teacher educators considering assigning a diary style study, I would advise using it as an option among several possibilities. (p.225)

For P4, the process of writing journals made her discover some painful realities of teaching and being a teacher. As she laments after her first individual teaching presentation,

By the end of the class, I felt like a failure. Everyone else had improved except me. I seem to degenerate with each presentation. My small hope of

becoming a teacher (that had recently grew) seemed ridiculously absurd now.

I feel I should opt for another profession. Teaching is not for me. I am not exaggerating when I say that I do not have what it takes to become a teacher. To others teaching seemed effortless. I was the direct opposite of this.

Either way, it was not good for my self esteem. The journey home was spent on lamenting – “What had gone wrong” – “Was I not convincing as a teacher” – “What grades will I get” – “Will this affect my result” “Will marks be deducted based on my presentation”. All these questions made me come home feeling dejected. I was heartbroken.

Thus, it can be concluded from this study that the journals were not really effective tools of growth in shaping the reflective process of the participants involved.

However, it was found that journal writing did give a more realistic and holistic perspective in trying to understand pre service teachers' beliefs, notions and attitudes about teaching English and the teaching profession at large, as well as their fears, worries and problems.

Thus, to a certain extent, it can be said that reflective journals do reveal insights into subtle issues such as teachers' beliefs, notions and attitudes of teaching English. It gives a very personal and deeper understanding of what goes on in the minds of pre service teachers from a more human perspective.

However, this study recommends that before such studies are conducted participants should be familiar with two essential aspects – writing in journals and writing reflectively. It is recommended that participants should have an introduction on the reflective teaching approach before similar studies are conducted. From the researcher's experience teaching at tertiary level, this is especially true for Malaysian students who are not really use to critically evaluating their learning experiences in depth. Therefore, factors like being comfortable and familiar with the journal writing genre and the ability to write reflectively and critically should be taken into consideration if findings are to be more conclusive.

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